Grammaring Along:  
Teaching Grammatical Bundles through Song

Sara Okello, Allison Piippo, & Wendy Wang
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Abstract
Music is a universal language and can be instrumental in second language teaching and learning. In this paper, we report on a materials development project on teaching grammatical bundles through song. By incorporating music into ESL grammar instruction and materials development, we provide students with the opportunity to enjoy grammatical bundles while learning to use them in meaningful and culturally enriching contexts.

Introduction
From the debate on “to teach or not to teach grammar” in the early 1980’s to our recent discussion on “how to teach grammar,” we have seen a dramatic pedagogical shift in ESL grammar instruction. By introducing the concept of grammaring, Larsen-Freeman (2003) challenges the traditional practice of teaching grammar as an area of knowledge and emphasizes the importance of teaching grammar as a skill. Larsen-Freeman (2003) defines grammaring as “the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately” (p. 143). This focus on form, meaning, and use can help students develop grammaring skills that they need in order to be able to communicate effectively. One of the pedagogical principles in teaching grammar proposed by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) is that the most frequently occurring structures should be dealt with first. Taking this frequency-driven approach to teaching grammar in intermediate and advanced ESL classes, we identify our target grammatical focus based on corpus research on lexical bundles in academic prose and conversation (Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011; Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004; Biber & Reppen, 2002; Biber & Conrad, 1999). Corpus studies on lexical bundles, defined as the most frequently occurring lexical sequences (typically of three to four words) in a register (Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004), have revealed that lexical bundles have strong grammatical correlates. The most frequently occurring structural types of lexical bundles, according to Biber, Conrad, and Cortes (2004), are those that incorporate dependent clause fragments, including that-clauses, WH-clauses, causative adverbial clauses, and conditional adverbial clauses. It is interesting to note that these structural types of lexical bundles, which we refer to as grammatical bundles, are found to be characteristic of interpersonal spoken registers (Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011; Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004). For many ESL teachers who have been teaching clausal structures typically in academic writing instead of in speech, this finding has significant implications for ESL grammar instruction and materials development.
Teaching Grammatical Bundles through Song

In search of authentic materials with meaningful contexts for the use of grammatical bundles in speech, we turned to popular songs, an enjoyable medium for language learning that is age-appropriate and culturally enriching (Gardner, 1993; Graham, 1993; Legg, 2009; Lems, 2005; Saricoban & Metin, 2000; Schön et al., 2008). By incorporating music into grammar instruction, students have the opportunity to enjoy grammatical bundles while learning to use them “accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 143).

In choosing songs with grammatical bundles for intermediate and advanced ESL classes, we utilized the following criteria: 1) Popularity—popular with memorable melody; 2) Frequency—frequent use of the target grammatical structure; 3) Singable Quality—easy to sing along; 4) Intelligibility—clearly-voiced lyrics; 5) Cultural Sensitivity—both the lyrics and YouTube videos are culturally appropriate; 6) Instructional Usability—the lyrics lend themselves to interesting classroom discussions; and 7) Availability—a playable copy of the song is readily available.

In reference to the above criteria, we have collected 19 popular songs in which the following most frequently occurring grammatical bundles are used (see Table 1). For a complete list of the YouTube videos, lyrics, and karaoke websites for the selected songs, see Appendix A.

Table 1: Grammatical bundles (adapted from Biber et al., 2004, p. 381)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grammatical bundles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1st/2nd person pronoun + dependent clause fragment (e.g., I don’t know why ...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>WH-clause fragments (e.g., what I want to ...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>If-clause fragments (e.g., if you have a ...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(verb/adjective +) to-clause fragment (e.g., to be able to ...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>That-clause fragments (e.g., that I want to ...)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instructional Activities

At the 2011 MITESOL Conference, the writers demonstrated how to engage students in grammaring along using one of the songs that had been tested in an advanced academic grammar class in an ESL program at a Midwestern university. The students actively participated in the pre-listening questions on the theme of the song, the during-listening cloze passage activity, and the post-listening discussion of the grammatical structure. They enjoyed the lesson and participated enthusiastically in the Karaoke Live activity, even staying after class was over to sing along. See Appendix B for the sample lesson we taught on WH-clause fragments in the song called No Matter What performed by Boyzone.

During the presentation at the 2011 MITESOL Conference, the writers also shared the following examples of activities that teachers could incorporate in different stages of the lesson to teach grammatical bundles using popular songs.

Pre-listening activities should aim to introduce the students to the song, the target vocabulary, and the grammatical structure. The objectives can include having the students discuss the theme of the song, learn some of the vocabulary in the song, and/or predict some of the content of the song. These objectives can be realized by including discussion questions on the theme of the song, pre-teaching of vocabulary (using words
and/or pictures), and predicting activities. For example, in the sample lesson activity in Appendix B featuring the song *No Matter What* sung by Boyzone, the students discuss questions based on the theme of the song, which is relationships.

Another pre-listening activity involves pre-teaching the vocabulary featured in the song. For example, in the song *If I Had a Million Dollars* sung by The Barenaked Ladies, the teacher could compose a pre-listening vocabulary activity that includes pictures of the objects mentioned in the song, as there are many cultural references with which the students may not be familiar. Before introducing the vocabulary, the students could brainstorm and predict which items the singers would choose to buy with a million dollars. Then the teacher can introduce the vocabulary words with which the students may not be familiar in order to increase the students’ comprehension of the song.

Another pre-listening activity could include having the students watch the YouTube or music video with no sound to predict the content. For the *If I Had a Million Dollars* song, students could view the images in the YouTube video (without sound) to help them predict what items the singers would buy with a million dollars. These activities will help prepare the students to understand the content and vocabulary and to learn the grammatical structure featured in the song.

The objective of the *during-listening activities* is to provide the students with a meaningful context of the grammatical structure through the medium of the song. The activities can include having the students identify the grammatical bundle in the song, listen for meaning or check their predictions, complete a cloze passage of the song with the grammatical structure missing, and complete a dictation of the song for slower songs. Students can also listen and raise a hand or stand up when they hear the target grammatical bundle. This activity would be especially beneficial for kinesthetic learners.

In addition, students could listen to the song while reading a handout of the lyrics with the grammatical structures textually enhanced (followed by an inductive lesson of the grammatical structures).

*During-listening activities* can include cooperative learning activities where students work together to develop their knowledge of the grammatical structure. For example, in the sample lesson activity about the song *No Matter What* in Appendix B, the students are divided into seven groups to fill in a cloze passage. Each group is assigned a different stanza to complete. Then the students compare their answers in their group and share their completed stanza with the whole class (see Appendix C).

Students could also participate in an activity in which “scrambled lyrics” are printed on separate pieces of paper that the students put in order as a group (for a more hands-on activity), or the scrambled lyrics can be on a piece of paper for the students to number in the correct order. Another activity can be a modified Jigsaw activity where the class is divided into groups of three. Each student is given a number from one to three and receives a copy of the appropriate cloze passage to fill out with different lyrics missing. When completing the task, the students in each group compare their answers and provide the missing lyrics to their peers (adapted from Carrier, 1996). For songs with slower melodies, the students could also complete a dictation of the lyrics where they write down the words that they hear (Saricoban & Metin, 2000). These during-listening activities aid in focusing the students’ attention on the grammatical structure while they listen to the song.
The aim of the post-listening activities is to help the students deepen their knowledge of the grammatical structure and build their fluency. These activities can include discussing the meaning of the song in groups, learning about the grammatical structure and using it accurately, participating in activities that aid the students’ learning of the grammatical structure, and singing karaoke in class to increase their fluency and use of the grammatical structure. Students can also practice the grammatical bundles and rewrite the lyrics using the same grammatical bundles to create a new song. The teachers can use the YouTube karaoke videos (see Appendix A) for students to sing karaoke and practice using the target grammatical bundles in a fun way. For example, in the sample lesson activity for No Matter What (Appendix B), the students sang along with the YouTube karaoke version of the song after the grammatical structure was presented. This karaoke method does not require teachers to buy any costly equipment since they can make use of the free website in their classrooms. In addition, students can play the game, “Don’t Forget the Lyrics” from the popular television game show. This game is played where the teacher stops at a certain part of the video (before the grammatical structure, for example), then has the students sing the next line of the song. This game can be played individually or as a group using the YouTube karaoke video.

Some teachers may be worried about whether their students will feel comfortable singing in class with their peers. If this is the case, the teachers should first try to feel comfortable themselves even if they are not musically inclined. Lems (2005) urges teachers to avoid “conceptualizing the classroom singing as a performance,” but rather treat it as a “sort of indoor campfire circle” (p.17). Lems also reminds us that people in many cultures of the world feel comfortable singing in public situations, such as in karaoke halls, a popular form of entertainment in Japan, Korea, and China, among other places. Thus, international students may feel more comfortable singing along with their fellow students, so the teacher does not have to worry about giving a solo performance in front of her/his class.

Another activity includes completing true-false statements about the content of the song and adding a final verse to the song (Saricoban & Metin, 2000). In addition, instructors can create assessments as a post-listening activity to test their students’ knowledge, understanding, and use of the grammatical structures. These post-listening exercises will help the students practice grammatical bundles in order to develop a deeper understanding of the grammatical structures and to improve students’ familiarity and fluency with the structures.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While the writers are pleased with the progress that has been made on this materials development project, they are well aware of its limitations, which include finding target grammatical bundles in songs and identifying the correct grammatical bundles, as some bundles belong to more than one category. The writers spent a significant amount of time trying to find songs that included the featured grammatical bundles and labeling them with the appropriate name of the dependent clause fragment. Finding songs that fit all of the criteria turned out to be no easy task. Clearly, there is plenty of room for further exploration. There are two more structural types of lexical bundles identified in Biber et al.’s (2004) study, which were not included in this project. Future research could discover popular songs that enable students to practice these two
additional structural types of lexical bundles. In addition to expanding the research base, the materials compiled here could be tested in various contexts both within and outside of the university setting and with high school or older students. Because of the universality of music and the necessity of learning grammar, these selected songs could also be used in EFL contexts to teach grammar to English language learners.

Even though the debate on whether to teach grammar is virtually over, the discussion on how to teach grammar effectively continues, as does our project on grammaring along with grammatical bundles. There is a wealth of songs to be discovered and their power harnessed to teach these grammatical bundles. The effectiveness of music to help students improve their grammaring skills holds great potential for grammar instruction and materials development.

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References


Appendix A: List of YouTube Videos, Lyrics, and Karaoke Websites for Selected Songs

1) 1st / 2nd person pronoun + dependent clause fragments

*Don't Know Why* – Norah Jones
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyhc4fsceb&feature=fvwrel
- Lyrics: http://www.lyrics007.com/Norah%20Jones%20Lyrics/Don%27t%20Know%20Why%20Lyrics.html
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hrk4RhPf8wM

*I Wanna Know What Love Is* – Foreigner
- Song on YouTube: http://www.e-chords.com/chords/foreigner/i-want-to-know-what-love-is
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7K9UEh1eoAs&ob=av2e

2) WH-clause fragments

*No Matter What* – Boyzone
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogjFSW7PqRY
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-zzUk1NiPw

*Hello* – Lionel Richie
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDZcqBgs74
- Lyrics: http://www.lyrics007.com/Lionel%20Richie%20Lyrics/Hello%20Lyrics.html
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0IZMGQUah4

*I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking for* – U2
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSv-lKwOQvE
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQBeYFKOVkY

*What Hurts the Most* – Rascal Flatts
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qH4hyi1-Ys&ob=av2e
- Lyrics: http://whatthrusthemost.com/
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wly_mJRSA0

3) *If* - Clause fragments
**Safety Dance** – Men Without Hats
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7movKfyTBII](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7movKfyTBII)
- Lyrics:
  - [http://www.lyrics007.com/Men%20Without%20Hats%20Lyrics/Safety%20Dance%20Lyrics.html](http://www.lyrics007.com/Men%20Without%20Hats%20Lyrics/Safety%20Dance%20Lyrics.html)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1c8-Wkkhw0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1c8-Wkkhw0)

**If...** – David Gates
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGfV0dTiuEc&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGfV0dTiuEc&feature=related)
- Lyrics: [http://www.links2love.com/love_lyrics_439.htm](http://www.links2love.com/love_lyrics_439.htm)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk3f9Lu9pnw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk3f9Lu9pnw)

**If You Don’t Know Me by Now** – Simply Red
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTcu7MBtuTs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTcu7MBtuTs)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1uJGP_fqCw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1uJGP_fqCw)

**If I Had a Million Dollars** – Barenaked Ladies
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHacDyj8KZM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHacDyj8KZM)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RlnR257Ak8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RlnR257Ak8)

**Time in a Bottle** – Jim Croce
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBWDHyAct4w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBWDHyAct4w)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB1Yl73j9A0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB1Yl73j9A0)

**If You Had My Love** – Jennifer Lopez
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.e-chords.com/chords/jennifer-lopez/if-you-had-my-love](http://www.e-chords.com/chords/jennifer-lopez/if-you-had-my-love)
- Lyrics: [http://www.mp3lyrics.org/j/jennifer-lopez/if-you-had-my-love/](http://www.mp3lyrics.org/j/jennifer-lopez/if-you-had-my-love/)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3qAqp9cp1o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3qAqp9cp1o)

4) *(verb/adjective + ) to-clause fragment*

**I Just Called to Say I Love You** – Stevie Wonder
- Song on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwOU3bnuU0k&ob=av2e](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwOU3bnuU0k&ob=av2e)
- Karaoke: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMdSb3aVGkM&ob=av2e](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMdSb3aVGkM&ob=av2e)
5) *That*-clause fragments

*Imagine – John Lennon*
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xB4dbdNSXY
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sX_btoDmQn8

*I Believe I Can Fly – R. Kelly*
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7mb102V1F0
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8qRJ2llyqo

*Everything I Do, I Do It for You – Bryan Adams*
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFD2gu007dc
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhmTP-Bjeho

*You Rock My World – Michael Jackson*
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1kHeeEMe-s
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7GzHeITir8

*You’re Still the One – Shania Twain*
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNZH-emehxA&ob=av3e
- Lyrics: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/shaniatwain/yourestilltheone.html
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zniiJlyx5iU

*The Rose – Bette Midler*
- Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oR6okRuOLc8
- Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8syMiZ0b25o
Appendix B: Sample lesson on teaching *WH*-clause in a song called *No Matter What* by Boyzone

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**No Matter What**  
By Andrew Lloyd Webber & Jim Steinman  
Performed by Boyzone

Song on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogjFSW7PqRY  
Lyrics: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/boyzone/nomatterwhat.html  
Karaoke: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-zzUk1NiPw

**Pre-Listening:**
- Think of a relationship you have had (romantic, family, friendship, etc.). Did the other person in the relationship share your beliefs? How did you deal with a difference in your beliefs?
- If you were in a relationship that your friends or family did not approve of, what would you do? Why?

**During Listening:**
*Directions:* Divide the class into seven groups. As you listen to the song, each group will work together to fill in a cloze stanza. Then you will share your completed stanza with the whole class (see Appendix C).

**Post-Listening:**
- Presentation of focused grammatical structure and its functions  
- *Grammaring Along:* Karaoke Live!
Appendix C: No Matter What

No matter **what they tell us,**
No matter ____________________.
No matter **what they teach us,**
____________________________ is true.
No matter ____________________.
However they attack,
No matter ____________________.
We’ll find our own way back.

Chorus: I can’t deny **what I believe,**
I can’t be ____________________.
I know I’ll love forever,
I know, ____________________.

If only tears were laughter,
If only night was day
If only prayers were answered,
Then we would hear God say.

No matter **what they tell you,**
No matter ____________________.
No matter **what they teach you,**
____________________________ is true.

And I will keep you safe and strong,
And sheltered from the storm,
No matter ____________________.
A dream is being born.

No matter ____________________,
No matter **where they lead,**
No matter ____________________,
I’ll be everyone you need.

No matter if the sun don’t shine,
Or if the skies are blue,
No matter ____________________,
My life began with you.

Chorus:
I can’t deny ____________________.
I can’t be **what I’m not,**
I know this love’s forever,
That’s all that matters now.

No matter what.